

# Obama's Potential for the Normalization of the Middle East

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## **Abstract**

*Even though it still may be too early to make such assessments, one could claim that Barrack Hussein Obama did bring a certain spirit of change with his assumption of the presidential office. Besides domestic concerns, Obama has become confronted with the complex Middle East, which has been longing for solution and brighter future. Thanks to his completely different rhetoric, more tolerant approach, as well as his unique background, one would think that Obama has full potential to bring desperately needed changes to the Middle East. The region has been home to numerous crises, which, when combined, cause unsolvable quagmire that is of critical moment to many involved parties' interests. Even though the whole situation is much more complicated, one could claim that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict lies at the core of the overall problem. However, despite his favorable characteristics Obama still remains constrained by many other factors, two of which will be covered in this paper. Like many preceding U.S. presidents, Obama is also being affected by the standards and expectations of the*

*sociological phenomenon called (American) Civil Religion—the set of American ethical and moral principles, closely associated with Christian tradition. They tend to elevate the United States and provide a dose of righteousness for its actions. Since Civil Religion greatly impacts the American institutions and foreign policy, it also brings it closer to Israel, making the relationship between the two rather natural. Another factor is, regardless of how controversial this may sound, the Jewish Lobby in the United States. The Lobby greatly impacts the U.S. foreign policy in order to make it more favorable or at least acceptable to Israel. The combination of the influences of the two factors may be seen in Obama's reluctance to decisively deal with the illegal Israeli settlements and their constant expansion into the so-called Palestinian territories. In terms of the relationship to Israel, Obama is not different from his predecessors, and therefore it is necessary to wonder what his actual potential may be in solving this particular crisis, which (if solved) would greatly simplify the overall Middle Eastern quagmire thus increasing the slightly idealistic prospects for the sustained and permanent peace in the region.*

## Introduction

Many believe that change arrived to America on November 4, 2008, when Barack Hussein Obama became a 44<sup>th</sup> President of the United States.<sup>1</sup> Like many of his predecessors, he inherited a number of challenges to be confronted in the anarchic international arena. One of those ever present challenges was, of course, the situation in the volatile Middle Eastern region. Promising change in both domestic and international affairs, President Obama became confronted with the combination of crises and developments, which have been shaking the Middle East ever since the colonial times, and later the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948.

Speaking of the manifold crisis present in the Levantine Middle East, Obama happened to be confronted with the following: 1) more than 60 years long Palestinian-Israeli conflict; 2) constant animosity between Israel and its neighboring countries (which, of course, has represented a security challenge for both American and all other involved countries' interests); 3) rise of the Islamic Republic of Iran (whose anti-American and anti-Israeli policies and rhetoric

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<sup>1</sup> The White House: President Barack Obama, 2009.

have brought the relationship between the United States and Iran to a complete ruin, and which has been constantly put under the renewed sanctions and threats); and finally, 4) the war in Iraq, which along with Afghanistan, has happened to be central US foreign policy challenge, especially in fighting the war on terror, seeking stabilization, democracy, and the American politico-economic hegemony (Sørli et al. 2005: 141-144).

The Middle Eastern quagmire has proven to be the *matter unsolvable* and hardly possible to methodologically grasp unless the roots of the overall East vs. West conflict are thoroughly addressed. The Middle Eastern crisis has, over time, taken many different dimensions and directions. Its multilayered and diverse effects can be felt throughout the region, and beyond. However, one decisive development, which further complicated the already complex state of the formerly divided and colonized Arab states, particularly stands out. As previously mentioned, it is the establishment of the State of Israel. This development, which started taking place after the Second World War, has sparked the still-lasting Arab-Israeli conflict, preceding numerous coming crises. Hence, the Palestinian-Israeli conflict is definitely one of those *roots* of the overall set of crises. Even though it may sound idealistic, worn-out, and repetitive, in order to increase the chances for establishing sustainable settlement, experts would agree, one must persist on observing the actual roots of the problem.

Ever since the beginnings of the concrete American involvement in the region many different United States' presidents have tried to settle the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, each having followed a different fashion. Significant impact onto the regional affairs had been made by Franklin D. Roosevelt, Richard Nixon, James Carter, Ronald Reagan, George H. W. Bush, William J. Clinton, George W. Bush, and is, momentary, being made by the current president—Barack Hussein Obama.<sup>2</sup>

Just like most of the mentioned presidents, Obama has also been showing “symptoms” of what Robert Bellah (2006) famously identified as the *Civil Religion*. Civil Religion, according to Bellah, can be defined as “the subordination of the nation to ethical principles that transcend it, and in terms of which it should be judged.” Furthermore, it has been crucial for “the development of institutions and [it] still provides a religious dimension for the whole fabric of American life, including the political sphere”

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<sup>2</sup> The White House: The Presidents, 2009.

(p. 225-228). It is rather apparent that the United States has been trying to export its policies and its way of life in the form of democratization, whereby one of the examples that can be observed through such a lens is the Iraqi War. Yet, it remains the fact that the notions and tendencies associated with the Civil Religion are normally somewhat conservative and even rightist, and that the U.S. is put forth as the example to others, especially since the concepts of freedom, prevalence, victory, faith, and higher Unitarian Deity<sup>3</sup> camouflaged in Biblical terms are emphasized in rhetorical, visual, and ultimately political manner. Naturally, such a set of values tends to be almost completely compatible with those of Israel, and can be accounted for as one of the reasons for America's consistent support for Israel and its actions. This automatically places both the United States and Israel on the same side of the coin, versus the other "antagonistic" Arab states and associated groups in the Middle East.

On the other hand, Obama definitely represents an interesting case. Besides some of his clearly Civil Religious values, elements like his background, multiculturalism, less-threatening rhetoric, and some liberal domestic policies make him indirectly more compatible with the Arab peoples in terms of reaching a consensus. Obama thus has a potential to depart from, I dare to say, "the stubborn American conservatism" which has, in terms of the American Middle East involvement, played against Arab interests—thus prolonging the conflict and expanding the overall crisis. Even though not all of his recent moves and policies completely reflect realistic desires to stabilize the Middle East, Obama nevertheless represents a historically favorable and balanced leadership figure, who can approach the Middle East question differently hence potentially increasing the chances for normalization (Agha and Malley 2009). The question remains whether he still has both power and willingness to start the period of change against all realistic costs and contradictions that have stuck to the American involvement in the region.

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<sup>3</sup> Even though it tends to be generally understood as the Christian God, the Unitarian Deity pertains to a more "general" God which, regardless of formal religion, sect, or affiliation should in essence be the same for all Americans, as long as the same values are shared and respected.

## Obama and the Civil Religion

Close to the end of the Second World War, President Roosevelt met the Saudi Arabian King Ibn Saud in order to discuss the then-emerging and relevant question of the Jewish settlement in Palestine upon which Roosevelt strongly insisted. Ibn Saud rebuffed to this whole idea, stating: "Amends should be made by the criminal, not by the innocent bystander. What injury have Arabs done to the Jews of Europe?" Roosevelt responded: "I will take no action with respect to the Palestine Mandate without consulting the Arabs" (Albright 2006: 125). Arabs feel that this old promise has never been completely fulfilled, i.e. that the American policies regarding the ethnic relations in Palestine have been exclusively one-sided. This is not far from the truth, especially if Israel's forceful settlements of the Palestinian territories are taken into account. Regarding the pre-Obama Israeli-American relations, Madeline Albright (2006), the former US Secretary of State under the Clinton Administration, points out towards some things which clearly have to do with the previously discussed phenomenon of Civil Religion. While the Americans generally feel sympathetic towards Israel based on their religious traditions, to the right-wingers, "any policy that results in Israeli's returning more land to the Palestinians [is being perceived as] either contrary to the Bible or dangerous to the security of Israel, or both" (p. 135-137).

Speaking of Obama and the complex question of the Israeli settlement of the Palestinian territories, it is important to note that this is where one of the first contradictions comes into play. Obama has succumbed to the powerful institutional pressures and allowed a great deal of Israeli settlements in these territories, thus undermining the process he was supposed to sponsor from the very beginning.<sup>4</sup> Numerous reports point towards the fact that the settlements did not only continue in their normal fashion, but have actually intensified only two months after Obama took office in January 2009 and consolidated his rule.

For instance, from January until March 2009, the Israeli press reports claim that around 1510 new structures were erected, one Palestinian farm destroyed, and 21 homes demolished. On the other hand, between March and May 2009—besides Netanyahu having approved of the plans for the construction of 73,000 new housing units—additional 690 structures have already been erected, 72 homes

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<sup>4</sup> LeVine, 2009.

demolished, one farm destroyed, and 170 dunams of land have been confiscated (FMEP Reports 2009). Clearly, there has recently been a dramatic increase in the Israeli settlements of the Palestinian territories, which makes the area for various speculations wide open. If we were to believe these analyses, then it was Obama's administration which, perhaps has not encouraged it, but which has given a green light or simply ignored these developments.

The alleged support for the settlements may as well be understood as the indirect and long term result of the certain elements of the American Civil Religion, which had become institutionalized from the earliest periods of American Independence, as it can be seen from the founding documents and early political speeches. This institutional foundation of the American political and moral principles obviously created a fertile ground for the eventual support of the Israeli actions. Regarding this matter, besides American-Israeli common religious and cultural traditions, Robert Bellah (2006) in his previously mentioned work *Civil Religion in America* himself makes a notion of "American Israel," where the righteous people have found and settled their promised land—America (p. 232-233). Obama, just like many of his predecessors, has been marked by the certain values and traditions of the Civil Religion. In the particular case of the Israeli settlements and the support for Israel, he simply does not differ from many of his predecessors.

Perhaps the most significant example of Obama's conformance with Civil Religion is his speech at the American Israeli Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) in June 2008, when he was still a presidential candidate running against John McCain. Even though this speech may be viewed within the framework of the presidential elections in which Obama needed the Jewish votes, the mentioned elements of the American Civil Religion become clearly emphasized. Underscoring the importance of the United States' support for the Jewish State, Obama made a series of dramatic statements. He asserted: "The bond between Israel and the United States is rooted in more than our shared national interests. It is rooted in shared values and shared stories of our people. As president I will make sure that this bond is strengthened." President Obama also made more specific assertions: "Those who threaten Israel—threaten us," and that "Jerusalem will remain the capital of Israel, and it must remain undivided!" Nevertheless, it should

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5 National Archives and Records Administration, 2009.

also not be forgotten that Obama did emphasize the importance of the two-state solution.<sup>6</sup>

This speech exhibits the first major contradiction coming from Obama. His support for the peaceful resolution of the conflict and his later neglect of the mentioned increase in the Israeli settlements and demolition of Palestinian property and territories clearly seem to be at odds. Regarding this dilemma, the question remains whether Obama is still flirting with Israel just to indirectly fulfill his election promises, or he is already thinking about the Jewish vote and support for the his potential second term candidacy. Nevertheless, when talking about Obama's support for Israel, it becomes hardly avoidable to slightly depart from the assessment of the influence of the American Civil Religion, and touch upon the highly controversial subject of the power of the Jewish lobby in the United States, which, according to many, is concentrated exactly around AIPAC.

## **Is Obama Another Puppet Of The Jewish American Lobby?**

One of the first reliable academic works on the subject of the Jewish Lobby in the United States came from the political scientists John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt (2006), who published an article (which eventually became expanded into a book of the same title and subject) titled *The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy*. Based on the facts that the United States has been the major donor of money, weapons, strategic intelligence, and that it has turned a blind eye at the Israeli development of nuclear arsenal, the authors try to identify which segment of the United States government has lead to such relationship. The question becomes that much more intriguing when one realizes that such "comforts" have been plunging the United States into a double standard—politics, since Israel receives a special treatment—fundamentally different from all other countries that are in any way involved with the United States. For instance, Israel annually receives around \$3 billion, and is not obliged to explain or provide reports on how this money is spent. As previously discussed, Israel has had the freedom to execute its own will in the Palestinian territories without being sanctioned like other countries would be have they been resorting to similar actions. Likewise, Israel receives a great

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<sup>6</sup> Barack Obama at AIPAC, 2008.

deal of valuable intelligence which is not even accessible to the actual NATO member states. Furthermore, the authors claim that Israel is currently in the position of being a burden rather than an asset, especially nowadays when the Cold War has been long over, and when the threats of Soviet expansionism and hegemony are no longer as relevant (Mearsheimer and Walt 2006). Finally, the United States has also been ignoring the fact that Israel has neglected and disrespected more than 70 United Nations resolutions, suffering no disciplinary measures, while the United States has vetoed more than 30 Security Council resolutions that questioned or criticized the Israeli actions (Lesch 2005: 117).

The same practices are retained to this day, when Barack Obama occupies the American presidential seat. Considering economic, political and moral disadvantages, it is rather strange to think that the United States is resorting to such support out of sheer altruism. Mearsheimer and Walt (2006) list a number of incentives that both allow the supposed lobby to function, and keep the United States government somewhat dependant on it. These incentives would include the financial reward for the supportive congressmen, the relevant intelligence and information assistance, partisanship of the Jewish voters, financial and organizational assistance during the U.S. domestic political campaigns, assistance and support for the War in Iraq, as well as the ability to do networking for the sake of establishing crucial national and international contacts and/or appointments important for the American diplomacy (Mearsheimer and Walt 2006).

Yet, even these speculations can become related to the previously discussed American Civil Religion. In this case, I have come to believe that the aspects of the deeply institutionalized Civil Religion, such as the arguments that the United States supports Israel as a result of the Jewish State being the only democracy in the region, and that the two are deeply related thanks to the common traditions, morals, and culture, can be used as a tool to counter and disprove of what the United States officials would probably deem a "Jewish lobby conspiracy theory" (Albright 2006: 135-137).<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, when Israel-related Middle Eastern affairs are concerned, Obama's administration does not seem to be bringing any significant changes regarding the American foreign policy.

However, interestingly enough, despite all these homogeneities and similarities with the previous

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.



administrations, the Middle East—especially the Arab world—still welcomes Obama's presidency and favors it incomparably more than the previous Bush's administration. In this paper I argue that this social phenomenon is simply the result of Obama's personal features and background, as well as some of his balancing anti-Bush actions thanks to which he has been able to present himself to the world as a new, different political current (Agha and Malley 2009).

## **Obama's Balancing Actions and the Impact of His Background**

Despite his all-out support for Israel, which can be seen as a direct action *against* the interests of the neighboring Arab countries, Obama still seems to enjoy more popularity than the ex-President George W. Bush in the Arab world. The Arabs have previously long ceased to believe in America as the source of help. Yet, despite some of his actions, and despite the ruined image of the United States in the Middle East and beyond, "by virtually every measure—name, race, origins, and upbringing—Barack Hussein Obama was a revolutionary presidential candidate" (Agha and Malley 2009). As such, Obama has had a great deal of potential to push for some changes in the region. According to the two authors, Obama's Middle Eastern policy should be centered on the two-state solution for the Israeli-Palstinian conflict, which would meet both sides' aspirations. However, the problem needs to be approached carefully, especially because if the entire process becomes tailored according to the American interests and guidance, the less likely it is that the Palestinians will approve and follow it. This is exactly where Obama's potential becomes rather obvious, since he, despite of what he said at in his June 2008 speech at the AIPAC, has "an ability to speak to a foreign audience and, without in any way diminishing America's dignity, elevate theirs" (Agha and Malley 2009). These Obama's charismatic characteristics may ultimately lead towards the inclusion of all concerned parties in a gradual two-state solution negotiation process.

Obama has been playing a balance card. By sticking to some notions of the Civil Religion, he has been able to increase the support of the American domestic conservatives and pacify the Jewish lobby. At the same time, he performed a number of both domestic and international moves which have alienated him from the classic American conservatism. He, quite liberally,

removed a ban from stem cell-research.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, besides congratulating the Iranians the Norouz holiday, he called for direct negotiations between the United States and the Islamic Republic, which suggests a completely different approach from the anti-Iranian stance he expressed in the mentioned AIPAC speech. Obama likewise initiated the closure of Guantanamo, while regularly repeating the plans of the American withdrawal from Iraq by December 31, 2011.<sup>9</sup> Such balancing actions have made him a more appropriate figure for the international political audience as well as for the Arab world, whose support may prove crucial for the normalization of the Middle East.

### **Conclusion: Does Obama Know What He Is Doing?**

Perhaps Obama is aware that the global change, as far as the American leadership is concerned, cannot come too quickly, and cannot be approached too directly. Limitations and challenges that he may run into, such as the Israeli strategic burden, the influence of the Jewish lobby, willingness to engage in the direct negotiations with anti-American Iran, while having to combine his liberal policies with the ever-present influence of the conservative-inclined American Civil Religion, have to be managed simultaneously and multilaterally.

The Middle East remains to be an extremely complicated matter, since it consists of a series of crises and socioeconomic quagmires. Yet, one of the key sources which, if solved, could greatly simplify the overall crisis is definitely the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Even though Obama has said to be the supporter of the two-state solution, he first needs to build a better and stronger relationship with the Arabs. To do that, he may want to redefine some of his stands on the situation—especially the ones, if these were trustworthy—which he outlined in his AIPAC speech. Obama must carefully and simultaneously modify and adjust his policies towards both the Israelis and the Palestinians. While doing that, he should certainly keep taking advantage of his multicultural background, international support, and charisma to more directly employ and include the international community in this process. Ultimately, after the American reputation-ruining Bush's administration, and despite of some clear-cut conformances to the Israel-supporting aspects of the American Civil Religion, Barack

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<sup>8</sup> Nasaw, 2009.

<sup>9</sup> See number 4.

Obama seems to have a historical chance to initiate a process which may, in the long run, finally normalize and bring peace and stability to the Middle Eastern region.

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